

Notes on Robert Jervis, Deterrence Theory Revisited, World Politics, vol. 31, no. 2, Jan 1979.
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The Cold War made deterrence theory popular, as did existence of nuclear weapons: "When weapons cannot be used for defense, the mind is quicker to search for their alternative uses." (For "mind," read MIC: those interests that wanted to produce weapons, to find uses for USAF weapons, to support a "healthy" aerospace industry...))290)

"Deterrence theory applies most easily, and perhaps applies only, when one side believes that the other is highly aggressive."

[This belief almost defines the Cold War, in the form of the equation, SU [Stalin] = Nazi Germany [Hitler]. I.e., there is no possibility of safe or useful diplomacy, negotiation, compromise ("appeasement"), let alone collaboration. All this follows from the assumption of zero-sum payoffs; yet deterrence presumes non-zero-sum payoffs, the threat of mutual disaster; thus, one must construct a model of a situation in which payoffs are not zero-sum but in which these conclusions still apply, i.e., the impossibility of compromise, etc. ANALYZE FURTHER; perhaps the usual assumption is "all outcomes other than war are zero-sum" (Jervis 298).]

In this sense, deterrence is part of the problem; more precisely, the belief that deterrence theory is applicable or adequate is part of the problem: it helps create and enhance the risk of nuclear war.

This relates to my dream-thought of two nights ago: that if nuclear war occurs, it is not only "deterrence," or "deterrent policy" that has failed: it is the deterrent perspective, the belief that deterrent policy comes close to being an adequate war-prevention or nuclear-war-prevention policy, that has failed. And along with it, every aspect of human culture has failed, culpably (i.e., the presumption is inappropriate that most aspects of culture are irrelevant to this problem, or that the catastrophe could not have been foreseen or more effectively averted).

"For even if the theory explains how actors behave when they are very hostile to each other," (293): in fact, this assumption is rarely explicit, or even conscious. The implication is, rather, that deterrence theory is inescapably appropriate in a world of nuclear weapons, or at least, a world in which there are two rival superpowers, whose antagonism is not explicitly presumed to be greater than the "normal" rivalrous antagonism of Great Powers.

To be sure, Reaganites do use a Manichean model, but they are seen as right-wing ideologues, whose assumptions are not at all necessary to the use of a deterrence model. Yet the "liberal Cold Warriors" who reason thus still give very little attention to the possibility of compromise and collaboration (except for "arms

control," in which they tolerate and not shocked or amazed or terribly distressed by the lack of result). And when some--like Gorbachev himself (or, in recent times, Kennan)--raise questions about the reality of fundamental antagonism, deep or irreconcilable, between the Soviets and the US, this is not seen as calling into question the basic model of deterrence theory.

Jervis goes on, above: "it does not tell us how or whether alternative policies could be employed to create a situation in which deterrence theory would not apply--a situation in which both sides would be much better off."

--i.e., a situation in which compromise, negotiation, collaboration, mutual education, are not "impossible," "undesirable, dangerous," or "ruled out" by statecraft, or simply ignored, the latter conditions being the implicit starting-point for the application of "deterrence theory."

Indeed, a situation in which there is not irrevocable and total hostility and aggressiveness may be one in which the postulates of deterrence theory may be misleading, dangerous guides to policy: not merely, one in which deterrent theory is not at its most appropriate, or is not wholly adequate by itself.

"The problems increase when we consider deterrence theory as a guide of statesmen. At best, it tells them how to maintain a hostile and dangerous relationship. It does not tell them how this situation might be changed, nor can they be sure whether deterrence is appropriate. And applying deterrence tactics to a state that is not a menace is likely to create a great deal of unnecessary conflict." [And to create an arms race that greatly increases the calamitous consequences of conflict. In both respects, this may have been the situation throughout the Cold War, even under Stalin.] (293)

"...deterrence says little about how to change the other's motives. Of course, deterrence theorists are concerned with the danger that states will become more aggressive if their unreasonable demands are met. [Fear of Munich, "appeasement"] But much less is said about transforming hostile relations into peaceful ones....Indeed, it is hard to see how the theory could be used either to explain how to change an adversary or to determine whether changes have taken place." [Or whether theory applies in the first place: an issue for 1945-87]. Deterrence theory is so inadequate on this score partly because it takes the state's own goals [payoff functions] as given." [A characteristic of economic theory, hence of strategic theorizing dominated by economists, systems analysts.]

[Changing the intentions of an adversary is not the only problem, nor the only neglected one. There is changing the "means-end relations" of one's own nation.]

"When can others [or one's own nation] be persuaded to adopt a "problem-solving" approach [or...?] and to defer short-run competitive gains in order to seek larger, but less certain,

benefits." 293. [A more urgent problem, in light of my crisis studies: to accept a short-run failure, setback, humiliation, rather than accept a less certain prospect of long-run societal catastrophe!]

Hypothesis: some of the failures of prediction of deterrence theory (e.g., the missile gap) may result, not from the lack of "rationality" by the Soviets, or lack of centralized control over decentralized units, or the strength of bureaucratic politics, but by misreading of Soviet payoffs, and specifically, by the fact that Soviet leaders do not perceive the relationship in terms that correspond to US "fears" of Soviet hostility and aggressiveness (they are not Hitlers).

The US, of course, rarely perceives its own aggressiveness, or takes seriously this inference by others. By the same token, American analysts have probably underplayed the significance of the no-invasion pledge in ending the Cuban Missile Crisis (see Khrushchev memoirs and his statement to Cousins: he did not surrender unconditionally, at all, from his point of view. This is missed even by those who presume, wrongly I suspect, that the offer of a private deal on the Turkish missiles was effective.

Jervis points out th